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ABSTRACT

Children whose parents are involved in their formal education, among other things, have better grades, test scores, and long-term academic achievement than those with disinterested mothers and fathers. Tutoring is probably the best way for parents to participate in public education, but parental attitudes and expectations toward academic achievement can be as important as explicit teaching activities. The term "at-risk" is not synonymous with minority student, student in poverty, or student in single parent or restructured household; however, some family characteristics do inhibit academic achievement. The design of a program that allows parents to interact with school professionals as colleagues or peers would be a positive way to foster parental involvement in education. Further, to stimulate parental participation, administrators can hire staff sympathetic to parent involvement, alert parents to home education's advantages, and use signed parent/teacher education contracts. (10 references) (KM)

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Mothers and fathers hold bake sales, supervise field trips, and serve on boards or advisory councils for schools. They attend school concerts, plays, and sporting events. As helpful as these customary forms of parent involvement are, they are far removed from what happens in the classroom. A growing body of research suggests that parents can play a larger role in their children's education.

What Are the Benefits of Parent Involvement?

There are many advantages when parents play an active role in the educational process. Children spend much more time at home than at school. Their parents know them intimately, interact with them one-to-one, and do not expect to be paid to help their children succeed. The home environment, more familiar and less structured than the classroom, offers what Dorothy Rich (1985) calls "'teachable moments' that teachers can only dream about."

Children whose parents are involved in their formal education have many advantages. They have better grades, test scores, long-term academic achievement, attitudes, and behavior than those with disinterested mothers and fathers (Anne T. Henderson 1988).

Many studies underscore the point: parent participation in education is very closely related to student achievement. A Stanford study found that using parents as tutors brought significant and immediate changes in children's I.Q. scores. Other research projects found that community involvement correlated strongly with schoolwide achievement and that all forms of parent involvement helped student achievement. The Home and School Institute concluded that parent tutoring brought substantial improvements to a wide variety of students (Rich).

Family and school benefit when they cooperate. Children feel that these two institutions—by far the most important in their lives—overlap and are integrated. Parents who help their children succeed academically gain a sense of pride in their children and themselves. Such parents are strong advocates for the district.

What Can Parents Do to Improve Their Children's Performance?

Tutoring is probably the best way for parents to participate in public education, according to Rich. Intensive, one-to-one teaching is highly effective, and, unlike meetings, it does not take parents away from their children and their home.

Tutoring can be as simple as reading a book or discussing a television show. It may entail meeting with a teacher to determine how to help with homework. Or it can mean mastering a detailed curriculum written by specialists in home learning.

Parents' attitudes and expectations toward education can be as important as explicit teaching activities. The American Association of School Administrators (1988) suggests the following "curriculum of the home": high expectations, an emphasis on achievement, role modeling the work ethic, encouraging and providing a place for study, establishing and practicing structured routines, monitoring television, limiting afterschool jobs, and discussing school events.

What Are the Special Challenges for Involving the Parents of At-Risk Children?

Educators of at-risk children must realize that the term "at risk" is not synonymous with minority student, student in poverty, or student in single-parent or restructured household. Yet, as Carol Ascher (1987) points out, some family characteristics tend to inhibit academic achievement: households in which the parent or parents do not interact often with their children, ones whose composition frequently changes, non-English speaking households, and families whose cultural traditions sharply vary from the school's.

Educators must take the initiative if they wish to overcome such challenges. Briggs Middle School in Springfield, Oregon, hired a parent educator and a therapist to work directly with parents of at-risk children (Thomas E. Hart 1988). They contacted seventy-five parents, ten of whom completed the five-class program. A program developed by the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools (1989) enables teachers to involve parents in their children's education in math, science, and social studies. The TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) program consists of guidelines and materials that any school or district can adapt to its own curriculum objectives and texts.

Middle College High School of New York City offers a parent support group in which parents define the topics discussed: parent-child communication, financial aid, and teenage lifestyles, for example (Douglas Berman and others 1987). Their children's attendance, grades, and behavior improved noticeably.

Ascher points out that asking parents to come to school "shuts out parents who are afraid or unable" to do so, the very parents who may well need the most help in educating their children. Home visits, tele-

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phone calls, and meetings in neutral locations may be the key to working with these parents.

How Can Schools Get Parents Involved in Their Children's Education?

Some parents are too distrustful of schools to help them educate their children. Muriel Hamilton-Lee (1988) prescribes three solutions: get parents involved in special activities like P.T.A. and school outings, enlist them in regular school affairs as assistant teachers or library aides, and incorporate them on planning and management teams. "Having parents interact with school professionals as colleagues and peers," she concludes, "does a great deal to reduce the barriers between them." Empathy is critical in any program for disadvantaged parents.

Yet many parents who will not volunteer in the schools or are unavailable during school hours will take time to help their children learn, particularly if they can do so at home. There are specific programs for such parents, such as Reading Is Fundamental and Family Math, which starts with parent-child workshops. Other districts devise their own home-study curricula, often consisting of one weekly activity. The TIPS program calls for parents to help their children with math and science homework and to make presentations in social studies classrooms.

Most parents require some sort of training before using such curricula. Staff can use P.T.A. meetings, open houses, or special meetings to discuss the programs and how to teach them.

Less formal programs are more easily implemented. Teacher-parent conferences are ideal opportunities for suggesting and explaining simple home study activities. Teachers can follow up such conversations by sending home notes and photocopied materials.

How Can Parent-Involvement Programs Be Implemented on a Districtwide Basis?

Innovative and energetic teachers find ways to involve parents in education. Capable administrators can do that on a larger scale.

Implementation begins by making certain that all staff members understand the subject's importance. Administrators can hire staff sympathetic to parent involvement by discussing the topic in job interviews. Inservice trainings and amended contract language can help to educate and convince tenured teachers. Simply asking or requiring teachers to schedule some of their parent conferences in the evening can make a big difference. Some districts hire a parent-school coordinator to work with faculty and parents to integrate school and home learning.

Administrators can also alert parents to home education's advantages. Newsletters and calendars offer simple and inexpensive vehicles. Some districts use more sophisticated media. Radio, television, posters, or fliers can convey short, catchy slogans on home education's importance, or they can speak to more particular topics. The Indianapolis Public Schools, for example, widely publicizes its teacher-parent conferences to encourage participation (National School Boards Association 1988).

The DeKalb County School System in Georgia uses signed contracts to underscore how important parent involvement is (Edward L. Bouie, Sr., and others, n.d.). The contract, which is also signed by the student and teacher, commits the parent to talking about school daily, attending teacher-parent conferences, monitoring television viewing, and encouraging good study habits. In turn, the teacher agrees to "provide motivating and interesting experiences in my classroom," explain the grading system, provide homework, and so forth. The district holds a signing day at the beginning of each year.

There are many ways to awaken and tap the special abilities and concerns that parents have in their children's education.

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